OCTÓGONO
Cadernos de polissemia artística
ISSN: 2976-0402
Número avulso (40)
28 de Julho de 2026
Autoria e edição: Paulo Martins Oliveira

THE STRANGEST MOSES – AN EARTHLY CREATION BY FRANCISCO DE HOLANDA

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Synopsis A study on one of the dynamic depictions conceived by Francisco de Holanda in his *De Aetatibus Mundi Imagines*.

Keywords Francisco de Holanda; Moses; the Bible; Michelangelo Buonarroti; Sandro Botticelli.

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When analyzing the creations of the old masters, it is important not only what they immediately report, but also what they suggest or insinuate.

In fact, those are compromise solutions deliberately designed on the threshold of ambiguity, aiming to represent a given moment, as well as integrate it into the dynamics of the respective context.

This is the case of Francisco de Holanda (1517-1584), who developed in a sketchbook[1] a set of polysemous images of a biblical nature, among which the *Chaos and Creation of Light* (or *The First Day of Creation*) is stressed here.

Francisco de Holanda, *Chaos and Creation of Light* (*The First Day of Creation*), in *De Aetatibus Mundi Imagines* [commons.wikimedia.org].

1 The sketchbook is titled *De Aetatibus Mundi Imagines,* and it is currently retained in Spain, similarly to the *Album dos Desenhos das Antigualhas* [*Album of Drawings from the Antiquities*] – regarding the latter, see the introduction to the reproduction published in 1989 by Livros Horizonte, p. 9).

To uncover the subtext of this image, one must first consider the way Moses was represented, who during the Middle Ages was usually depicted with two small horns due to a mistranslation of the oldest biblical texts.

However, upon realizing that these writings actually referred to Moses' head as being haloed by light, Renaissance artists adapted the correct information to the artistic tradition of their fellow predecessors, thus creating new figures of Moses with horns of light or fire.

Comparative example

Hendrik Goltzius, *Moses with the Tablets of the Law* [commons.wikimedia.org/BritishMuseum].

A particularly original version is precisely the aforementioned image created by Francisco de Holanda, which in essence synthesizes the logic of the Judeo-Christian religion, from its Alpha to its Omega (letters which are even represented in the first triangular light).

Thus, the analysis of that picture is itemized as follows:

• Inspired by the first verses of Genesis, the representation depicts the Creation resulting from the will and word of the geometer God who, constituting the root of luminous knowledge, orders the formless chaos[2].

2 Beyond practical reasons, natural light (especially sunrise) was symbolically important in the architecture of libraries, where the various subjects were organized based on the theological root (Verbum/Word/Knowledge) – on this matter, see "A Real Livraria de Mafra – A Máquina do Verbo", *Octógono* n.9 / Nov.2024 [academia.edu | archive.org].

• Among other aspects, and as can be seen in Francisco de Holanda's work, the V-shaped configuration of the light abbreviates the term Verbum, i.e. Word as illuminating knowledge, or Wise Word.

• Jn.1:1-5 (Creation of the world ≈ Incarnation in the world) , In principio erat Verbum, & Verbum erat apud Deum, & Deus erat Verbum. Hoc erat in principio apud Deum. Omnia per ipsum facta sunt & sine ipso factum est nihil, quod factum est. In ipso vita erat, & vita erat lux hominum; & lux in tenebris lucet, & tenebrae eam non comprehenderunt. / In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it[3].

• Composed of three partially overlapping triangles, that luminous shape projected onto the Earth symbolizes the Christian Trinitarian conception (God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit).

Comparative example

Albercht Dürer, *Adoration of the Trinity/Landauer Altar*, Kunsthistorisches Museum [commons.wikimedia.org/GoogleArtProject].

• In Francisco de Holanda's illustration, the triangular composition (geometry, proportion, order directed towards the Earth) guides Creation. Note that in the Old Testament, there is a recurring comparison of God to a potter who shapes the world and mankind, even comparing them to vessels[4].

3 Regarding this issue, see also Job.28:20-28; Ps.49:2-5 [Ps.48 in the Vulgate]; Sir.1:4-5, etc.
4 Eg. Job.10:8, 38:14; Ps.95:4-5 [Ps.94 in the Vulgate]; Isa.29:16, 64:7; Jer.18:1-8, 33:2; Wis.11:17, 15:7.

• The world in creation is therefore suggested as a vessel on the potter's wheel which, in this initial phase (Alpha), will still be fired to gain solidity.

Francisco de Holanda, *Chaos and Creation of Light* (*The First Day of Creation*), det., in *De Aetatibus Mundi Imagines* [commons.wikimedia.org].

• However, this formless period of Creation is used to introduce the corruption of the world by the Devil (≈ chaos), suggested by an undefined face with two horns of fire.

• Then begins the slow process of redemption, here symbolized by the superimposed Moses with his flaming horns (as contextualized at the beginning of this text).

• As guide and judge of the Chosen People, Moses is considered a precursor to Jesus Christ, as is widely observed in the Sistine Chapel[5].

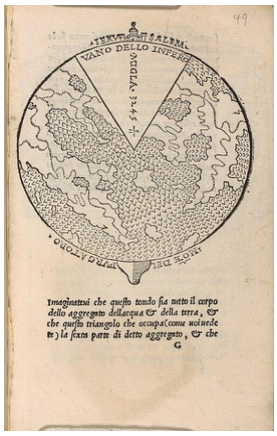
Michelangelo, *Last Judgement*, det., Sistine Chapel [commons.wikimedia.org/BurkhardMücke].
Sandro Botticcelli, *The Punishment of Korah*, det. Sistine Chapel [commons.wikimedia.org].
On the altar wall, Christ is at the center as supreme judge; the outline of that wall suggests the Tablets of the Law given to Moses. Furthermore, Christ's gesture evokes that of Moses the Punisher, painted earlier by Botticelli on one of the side walls of the same Chapel.

5 Regarding the various allegorical devices in the Sistine Chapel, see the papers collected in *Italian-crafted. Studies 2012-2016* [archive.org]; *Leonardo x Michelangelo* [academia.edu | archive.org]; and more recently "The dynamic consummation of time in Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*", *Octógono* extra number (24) / Dec.31, 2025 [academia.edu | archive.org]. Regarding the image analyzed here, it can be seen that it also suggests the parting of the waters (Moses) and possibly the preceding episode of the great Flood (Noah), summarizing key episodes from the Old Testament.

• Since Moses was just a precursor, the true Saviour – Jesus Christ – will descend and incarnate on Earth to sacrificially fall himself into the abyss of death, from which he will resurrect. Mankind will thus have its redeeming beacon until the end of time (as can easily be interpreted from Francisco de Holanda's multilayered composition).

• When the time of Revelation arrives, the Earth will be consumed by fire, and the unrepentant will be cast into the abyss, falling into the care of the great Devil.

Comparative example


VANO DELLO INFERNO
VESTIBOLO
MONTE DEL PURGATORIO
Imaginatui che questo tondo sia tutto il corpo dello aggregato dellacqua & della terra, & che questo triangolo che occupa(come uoi uede te) la sexta parte di detto aggregato, & che

Antonio Manetti, *The Chamber of Hell* (Dante's *Divine Comedy*) [commons.wikimedia.org/CornellUniversity].

• As implied in the image engineered by Francisco de Holanda, the Old Testament, Judaism, and Moses are not sufficient to achieve Salvation.

• And yet, in his goodness and omnipotence, Christ can rescue from the abyss the righteous Hebrews who, even if unbaptized, have contributed to the divine redemptive mission. For example, based on ancient traditions (Voragine, Apocryphal Gospels, etc.), Dante described the rescue of "Moses the lawgiver, and just and true", as well as other ancient prophets, from Limbo to Paradise (*Inferno*, IV).

Hendrik Goltzius, *Moses with the Tablets of the Law*, det. [commons.wikimedia.org/BritishMuseum].
Recalling a previously shown image, note that Moses' flaming horns suggest the wings of the dove of the Holy Spirit, indicating his Christian blessing. Although more allegorical and dense, Francisco de Holanda's composition suggests the same essential idea.

• At the end of times, there will be a first defeat of the evil forces, imprisoned and sealed in the abyss for a thousand years. Released for a time, these forces will be defeated again, now definitively, by divine fire unleashed from heaven (Rev. 20:2-3, 9).

• From the heavens will then descend upon the scorched Earth the saving and golden Heavenly Jerusalem to house the blessed, who will henceforth live in peace under the light of the "Lamp," i.e. Jesus Christ, "the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End" (Rev. 21:1-2, 21-24; 22:13).

• And then, everything will be consummated...

In brief, integrating and reinforcing the artistic logic of the time[6], Francisco de Holanda aimed not only to represent an episode from Genesis, but also, from there, to synthesize the dynamics of faith leading to the final Revelation. To this end, he resorted to the full power of the image, particularly through compromise solutions, overlays, and carefully crafted ambiguities.

6 See for instance "Rembrandt, the Philosopher and the redeeming whale", *Octógono* extra number (27) / Feb.1, 2026 [academia.edu | archive.org].